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Military Medicine Promotes Global Health Security with Partner Nations in West Africa

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Dr. David J. Smith, performing the duties of the assistant secretary of Defense for Health Affairs (right), and Dr. Chris Daniel, senior advisor for global health engagement (second from right), discuss laboratory capabilities with Nigerian medical officials. (Courtesy photo)

The word *health* resonates across borders and cultures.

That lesson was made clear during a recent trip by Military Health System leaders to three African nations, underscoring the enduring commitment of the MHS to help partners build enhanced capabilities to respond to infectious disease and other public health threats around the world.

As part of the [Joint West Africa Research Group](#) (JWARG), the team traveled to several medical research and clinical training facilities in Nigeria, Liberia and Ghana, where U.S. military medical experts are helping to strengthen important biosurveillance and clinical response capabilities. They also took the opportunity to meet with military and public health leaders in each nation to discuss how to continue the momentum of recent successes.

“Working with our partner nations to develop capabilities and experience is a critical part of our military medical mission,” said Dr. David J. Smith, currently performing the duties of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Health Affairs. “By engaging with our partners directly, we can share lessons learned and help improve the world’s ability to improve public health and prevent outbreaks of disease, as well as ensure the safety of our service members and military personnel when they are deployed.”

Global health engagement – the military’s name for this kind of interaction with partner nations – builds mutual trust, enhances interoperability, and promotes health security.

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The value of health as a tool for building bridges with partner militaries was clear throughout the trip. In Nigeria, the team saw how valuable international efforts have been to the Nigerian people in combating HIV-AIDS. In Liberia, they toured a liquid nitrogen production and storage facility provided by JWARG that supports advanced biomedical research. And in Ghana, medical leadership within the Ghanaian Armed Forces expressed enthusiasm for continued research collaboration.

"It's exciting to see the remarkable amount of work that our military medical professionals in JWARG have done in such a short time," said Dr. J. Christopher Daniel, senior advisor for Global Health Engagement in the office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Health Affairs, and one of the leaders who participated in the trip. "It's important to remember that infectious disease does not respect borders, so these measures don't just keep our partners safe, they keep our own service members safe as well. That supports our force health protection mission. This work also aligns with the objectives of the Global Health Security Agenda to prevent avoidable infectious disease outbreaks, detect threats early, and respond rapidly and effectively when outbreaks occur."

JWARG was formed in response to gaps in global public health preparedness and responsiveness, highlighted by the 2014-15 West African Ebola outbreak. The program builds upon local partnerships previously established in the three host nations by the Walter Reed Army Institute of Research, the Naval Medical Research Center, and the Ghana Detachment of Naval Medical Research Unit-3. These organizations, along with a number of other military, government, and academic institutions, now collaborate to improve pandemic responsiveness across the West African region.

JWARG members work together on a number of initiatives focused on laboratory and clinical strengthening, biosurveillance, and countermeasure development. The program has already conducted an expansive set of training programs in the U.S. and West Africa on clinical management of diseases, genomics, diagnostics, chemistry, hematology, and other medical topics particularly relevant for promoting regional and global health security.

JWARG developed a clinical course on tropical and emerging infectious diseases in Lagos, Nigeria, which incorporated hands-on lab training to improve participants' ability to identify, diagnose, and treat infectious disease threats. The curriculum covered dangerous viral diseases such as [Ebola](#) and [Lassa fever](#), in addition to more common tropical diseases such as [malaria](#).

Daniel says he came away from the visit with high hopes for the future of both the program and the military's broader global health efforts. "JWARG is a premier example of global health engagement done well and should be viewed as a model for future overseas military medical research and global health engagement efforts."

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